

2007

## Thucydides and the Soul of Victory: Olympic Politics in the Peloponnesian War

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### Recommended Citation

Dobski, Bernard J. "Thucydides and the Soul of Victory: Olympic Politics in the Peloponnesian War." *Socrates: Reason or Unreason as the Foundation of European Identity*. Edited by Ann Ward. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. Pages 98-111.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# THUCYDIDES AND THE SOUL OF VICTORY: OLYMPIC POLITICS IN THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

BERNARD J. DOBSKI, JR.

Thucydides comes down to us as the author of an account of the life and death of Greek politics known traditionally as the History.<sup>1</sup> Because Thucydides is widely considered a historian and not a philosopher, we do not think in the first place to study him when we ask whether Socrates and the political philosophy to which he gave birth form the roots of European identity. Indeed, in the only work Thucydides leaves us, one encounters no philosopher and the word "philosophy" is used only once (II.40.1). And to our knowledge Thucydides never spent any time with Socrates or his students.

But Thucydides' relevance to a Europe whose political identity has increasingly come into question becomes clear when we reflect on the justification of his great theme. The greatness of his work flows from the character of the Hellenic civilization that the Peloponnesian war destroyed and of which it was the peak. One may therefore understand Thucydides as the first to account for and evaluate the origins of that civilization. For Thucydides, what makes Greek civilization unique derives from the Greeks' discovery of politics, understood as the emergence of and respect for the common good. If the ideal embodied in Greek politics forms one of the pillars of European identity, then turning to Thucydides should offer a useful corrective for a Europe that flirts with the ideological temptation to, as one commentator suggests, abandon its identity and be done with politics.<sup>2</sup> To be specific, Thucydides' work reminds contemporary Europeans who seek to transcend their national boundaries of the civilizing and moderating effects of political communities devoted to common, and thus exclusive and particular, goods. The History thus provides a cautionary tale for all those tempted by immoderate and utopian desires to abandon such exclusive and particular communities.

But what does this have to do with *Socrates*? When we reflect on the traditional classification of Thucydides as a historian we discover that this label rests partly on an anachronism; *his* work precedes the emergence and hardening

of the divisions between the sciences, themselves originating much later in the work of Aristotle. And in claiming to present the enduring truths regarding the nature of man and of politics through an account of a single event, Thucydides comes to sight as neither historian nor philosopher nor poet, as Aristotle understood them, but some combination of all three. Indeed, the very form and content of the History force us to question the rigidity of such distinctions and the epistemological assumptions they embody. His claims to universal insight coupled with his unremitting focus on practical politics and his conscious refusal to indulge in any explicit theorizing suggest that Thucydides discovered a "new" method of presenting political wisdom, one seemingly opposite that employed by the Platonic and Xenophontic "Socrates." His work thus invites us to question anew the approach traditionally associated with political philosophy. In Thucydides' presentation of the life and death of Greek politics we find his contemporary relevance to Europe and his contribution to classical Greek rationalism delicately interwoven. This paper intends to provide an account of that interweaving.

The commentary on Thucydides' text that follows intends to show that Thucydides, in revealing the distinctive character of Greek politics as he does, also indicates the conditions necessary for reflecting on the nature of Greek political life. By exposing the nature of Greek politics, he points out the limits facing the common good and thus points to the limit to our capacity to know a political good that is wholly common. In seeking to abandon a *Europe des patries*, contemporary Europeans not only flirt with dangerous utopian visions; they also risk obscuring our sense of the limits to reason and thus obstructing the wisdom that reflects our acceptance of them.

### **The Olympic Character of Greek Politics**

To grasp the import of the Greek ideal to Thucydides (and to European politics), we must begin with his account of the birth of Greek politics. And that means we must turn to his first comments on Greek politics and Olympic contests as he presents them together at the very opening of his narrative account (I.6). In turning to Thucydides' narrative, however, one must exercise care. His account of the ancient past, like all his narrative, is unusually compressed, forcing its readers to tease out those insights that govern its composition. To appreciate the narrative's political wisdom, the reader must supply on his own the reflections that inform and unite the seemingly offhand details dotting Thucydides' prose. And the reader can only do this if he works backwards, as it were, reconstructing Thucydides' political wisdom from the details that he selected for his narrative. By approaching the archaeology in this way, we can best discover what makes Greek politics so distinctive.

Thucydides remarks that it was in Sparta first where the great among the citizens chose to observe an equality of appearance (*isodiattoi*) among the many, adopting the more modest style of dress worn by the poor. A sense of restraint on one's outward conduct on behalf of the welfare of others originated in Sparta. He then notes that the Spartans also originated the Olympic practice of wrestling in the nude. By having one follow the other Thucydides invites us to uncover how one of his seemingly irrelevant asides bears on one of his most explicit and most important political notes.<sup>3</sup>

According to the narrative, those who dominate in politics freely choose to conceal outward appearances of their superiority. Those who aspire to dominate physically, on the other hand, choose to reveal themselves when competing. By discarding their clothes, the Spartan wrestlers discard conventional covers and restraints, staking out a kind of non-conventional, or natural, self-sufficiency. Because such a self-disclosure aims at revealing one's natural greatness and beauty, then it cannot be understood as simply a means to the victor's garland; indeed, the very act of disrobing testifies to one's superiority insofar as it requires one to overcome the shame of one's nakedness. The concern for how one competes (clothed or unclothed) thus mediates the concern for victory and its spoils. The contest's outcome is now understood to confirm about the contestants what the audience should see with their "own two eyes." Exercising naked amounts to a claim to the goods of victory in light of one's nature. On the basis of this innovation, Thucydides draws his first distinction between the Greeks, who fight in the nude, and the Asiatic barbarians, who cover their bodies in the pursuit of victory's rewards.

To reconcile the Spartan practice of self disclosure with the Spartan politics of concealment, we must recall that in the on-going contest to preserve their rule, the Spartan great voluntarily limit the open exercise of their power by concealing the appearance of their greatness. Like the grapplers, they eschew the concern for the material goods that follow from rule in favor of considerations regarding how they rule. And like the Olympic combatants, they aim to establish their superiority in terms of self-sufficiency. For who else, but the supremely self-sufficient, could afford to forego the possession of those goods that rule affords? Moreover, by donning the garb of the commoners they refrain from gaudy displays of wealth. The pride of the demos, and thus the stability of the community, serves to check their pursuit of individual self-interest. Thus devotion to the community's welfare, understood as the disclosure of one's superior character, seems to be both a means to legitimate rule and an essential part of the rule itself.

By crediting the Greeks with generating the concern for "the common," Thucydides credits them with discovering politics itself. And by crediting the Greeks with the discovery of politics, he credits them with revealing more

clearly than before the human origin of the sense of a rightful limit on self-interest. Such an interpretation is, of course, by no means obvious, but what Thucydides tells us about the earliest Athenians, in a note just prior to this section, lends it support.

Forced to farm Attica's poor soil and dogged by the constant threat of starvation, the early Athenians naturally possessed a heightened awareness of their vulnerability and exposure to need. The experience of such constant need seems to have impressed upon them the fact that no amount of goods could ever free them from the threat of evils. This awareness was reinforced, paradoxically, by the fact that some of those who originally settled the city were no weaklings themselves. They too originally possessed power, but not enough power (they were *dunatotatoi*, I.2.6). The depth of the Athenians's concern for self-sufficiency finds perhaps no more artful expression than in the note that later generations, growing into a more luxurious way of life, discarded the convention of wearing golden-grasshoppers in their hair (I.6.3), a convention intended to honor the city's autochthonous gods.<sup>4</sup>

By reminding them of their autochthonous gods, such adornments recall their attachment to and dependence on this particular land, as infertile and unforgiving as Attica is. By abandoning this convention as they freed themselves from poverty, the wealthy Athenians revealed their yearning to be free of their bond to this particular land and the physical neediness that that bond signified. Their actions testify to their desire to break free from the limits imposed by both nature and the gods. Their impiety points to their desire for a complete and total freedom, and thus a self-sufficiency, that is entirely the product of one's own efforts. Owing itself to no one or no thing outside of one's self, such freedom appears, quite naturally, limitless. Desires for such freedom and self-sufficiency, however, seem to be at odds with the earliest Athenians's initial experiences with both nature and politics. The encounter with an inhospitable nature combined with their political failures seems to have made these Athenians keenly aware both that they require external goods to satisfy the needs which plague them and that they can never have enough power to acquire all the goods necessary to satisfy such needs. In this light, the endless pursuit of unlimited power surely appears absurd.

Awareness of this predicament, however, seems perfectly consistent with both the Spartan efforts at disclosure and concealment. By voluntarily eschewing the possession of external goods, the Spartan elite, for example, could establish their superior self-sufficiency-and thus their superior claim to rule-while circumventing the otherwise absurd effort to satisfy a limitless need. In fact, in revealing their superior character, the Spartan elite decisively improve on the example of the wrestlers; one's character is less needy because it is less vulnerable to the whims of nature and fortune. And because it is independent of

biology, one's character also appears to be more "one's own"; the self-sufficiency they seek to reveal derives almost entirely from their own efforts. At any rate, the Greeks appear to provide a rational response to the conflict between the efforts to satisfy their seemingly endless needs and the limits, natural or otherwise, to all such efforts.

Given its place at the beginning of Thucydides' discussion of Greekness, we should not be surprised to find such a political psychology at work in the wartime efforts of both the Athenians and the Spartans. At the least, those cases when Thucydides draws our attention to Olympic contestants should reinforce the lessons so subtly intimated in his narrative even as they invite us to bring our earlier insights to bear on the passages in question.

### Cylon

Cylon is the first Olympic victor noted in the History (I.26). He was an Athenian noble who attempted to overthrow the city of Athens and establish himself as tyrant. Cylon based the date of his coup on the Delphic oracle's prophecy that he should seize Athens on the greatest festival day. And he presumed the greatest festival day to occur during the Olympic festivals since he was crowned Olympic champion during these holidays. Cylon thus appears fueled by the conviction of his superiority as revealed in his Olympic victory. And he appears to desire to dominate Athens openly to reveal his own greatness just as the Olympic wrestlers revealed themselves in part to disclose their natural superiority.

But while consideration of Olympic nudity suggested the contestants understood their victory to reveal their attention to some rightful limit on their quest for victory, Cylon's story suggests that he wanted to rule Athens alone and without limit. He did not see, as the Spartan great saw, that to establish his true superiority he must establish his independence from the goods that come with ruling. Nor did he see that this is best effected through service to others. Had he reflected on what he hoped to win by the possession of a good like political rule, he might have seen that devotion to the common good and not tyranny best reveals one's superiority.

To come to such an insight, Cylon would have had to reflect on those physical and psychological needs driving him to pursue tyranny. And such reflection would have forced him to accept the limits to his political hopes and thereby moderate his political aims. At least this is what the details of his story would suggest. For instance, Thucydides notes here that another religious festival was also considered the greatest – the Diasia, a festival celebrated outside the city. He also notes, as a seeming aside, that most of those who live outside the city are poor and that, on account of their poverty, the poor who

participate in the Diasia do so by sacrificing to the god animals fashioned out of cake (I.126.6). By distinguishing this festival of Zeus by the presence and participation of the poor, this seemingly minor detail's political relevance emerges much more clearly. Thucydides' apparent aside here invites us to contrast the example of the demos, whose poverty and neediness compel them at once to sacrifice and to moderate their sacrifices, with that of the wealthy nobleman Cylon, who seeks unlimited political power for himself.

Because Cylon does not include the Diasia in his political calculations, he does not think of the poor, the bodily needs that plague them, and the pieties that moderate their sacrifices. And this failure mirrors his misinterpretation of the oracle. Insofar as he judges his Olympic victory to confirm his superior worth, and insofar as this judgment clouds his interpretation of the prophecy, Cylon fails to see that his superiority is best revealed through political moderation. Because his misinterpretation of the oracle allows him to forget what is nearest to his city, like the religious festival in Attica, then it appears that Cylon has not sufficiently reflected on what is nearest to him, like the neediness that drives him to pursue immoderate political rule.

In light of his Olympic victory, Cylon's failure in Athens compels one to raise questions about the link between one's presumed natural superiority and the recognition by others of that quality: if he was manifestly superior to Athens' current rulers then how could he have failed? His failure forces us to ask whether the presumed good of political rule, with its public recognition of who is politically superior, satisfies what men like Cylon seek in disclosing their greatness. After all, how can the public confirmation of his greatness testify to his superior self-sufficiency and thus superior goodness when he also depends so completely on the public's approbation? The following digression on Pausanias (I.128-135.1) and Themistocles (I.135.2-138), two men also charged with aspiring to tyranny, deepen these reflections.

### Alcibiades

Of course, to see these reflections confirmed, we must turn to Thucydides' presentation of Alcibiades. After all, few Greeks in Thucydides' work represent Greek greatness like Alcibiades.<sup>5</sup> Surely he, of all figures, represents the psychology of the Olympic champion. But Alcibiades did not participate in the Olympic games; he sponsored the chariots who were first, second and fourth victors at the Olympic games (VI.16). Such distance from the field of competition finds its parallel in his curious absence from the field of battle. Given his reckless political ambitions one is surprised to discover that we never witness Alcibiades engaged in armed conflict. He is always behind the action, trying to orchestrate the great political drama unfolding before him. This fact

reflects the amazing indirection characteristic of his policies as a whole (see for instance, VI.48); his plans always rely on deceit, feints, and playing his opponents off of each other. Such indirectness of action, however, contrasts strikingly with the candor with which he asserts in speech both his right to rule his fellow Athenians (VI.16) and his pursuit of even loftier ambitions (VI.89-92).

Alcibiades' apparent refusal to engage in direct conflict with others, however, does not stem from any reservations about his superior qualities as much as it stems from his profound belief that they are so manifestly great as to render any direct contest unnecessary. In this way, his character embodies a more rational stage in Olympic political psychology. For by reflecting on the questions occasioned by Cylon's failure, one must also raise questions about the very logic behind Olympic victors. If one's greatness is in fact as manifest as one supposes, then what explains the need to have it confirmed by others? To pursue such confirmation through physical contest is to admit tacitly that one's greatness is not as manifest as originally supposed. And a coerced confirmation is not nearly as sweet as one freely granted. Awareness of such points seems to explain Alcibiades' resort to persuasion as opposed to force. Through speech he can reveal his course of action to be the superior course, and through the rational disclosure of such superiority he can gain the voluntary compliance of his audience.

Of course, to say that Alcibiades reflects a more rational development of Olympic political psychology is not to say that his perspective is simply rational. For if Alcibiades does not wish to compete openly for the public's recognition of his virtue, then his title to rule will always remain in question. On the other hand, if he does deign to test his worth openly-through force or speech-then he must admit that a question exists as to his manifest superiority. Alcibiades surely knows, for instance, that his political enemies, be they Athenians, Spartans or Persians, will not simply acquiesce to his political will. Their resistance alone should cause him to reflect on the divergent interests that define political life; it should lead him to reflect on the connection between one's presumed greatness, which should be its own reward, and the goods one believes to be owed on account of that presumption.

These reflections emerge most clearly in Thucydides' lengthiest treatment of Olympic victors and Olympic games (V.49-50 and ff). Thucydides notes that during the games in the 12th year of the war the Boeotian-led chariot of the Spartan Lichas was declared victorious. So that all the Greeks would know he was responsible for the win, Lichas crowned his driver in the middle of the concourse. Because it had recently been declared unlawful for Spartans to attend, participate in or even sacrifice at the games, Lichas was publicly whipped. Unable to resist the desire to reveal his responsibility for the chariot's



victory, Lichas's actions implicitly testify that winning by itself (if on the sly) is not enough; he needs the Greek world to witness his superiority even though it might mean, oddly enough, risking the stain of impiety and public humiliation. Had he been content merely with the knowledge of his chariot's victory—that is, had he been more moderate in his expectations about what victory could mean for him—Lichas could have left the Olympic Games unscathed. His example suggests that understanding one's superior self-sufficiency as a good in itself is perfectly consistent with a prudence that requires us, at times, to practice a certain concealment.

While Lichas, the Spartan sponsor of charioteers, suffers the shortcomings of his "Olympic" understanding, Alcibiades, his Athenian parallel, manages to avoid a similar fate. Always able to wiggle out of a jam, Alcibiades is never compelled by some political failure to ask how voluntarily limiting the pursuit of self interest can be at once the means to his good and the very good he pursues. Nor do we see him ask what is so sensible about concealing himself in the service of revealing his greatness. Were he to raise such questions, Alcibiades would also be led to wonder how the political rule he seeks can reveal and thereby establish his superiority if it is also and at the same time supposed to confirm a superiority that should already be manifest. Put differently, if one's greatness is understood in terms of self-sufficiency, then one cannot also claim, as Alcibiades does, to be entitled to extra goods on account of that greatness. At any rate, one might expect such questions, if asked, to introduce at least a temporary pause in one's pursuit of political rule, a pause we see nowhere in Alcibiades' frenzied career.

By helping us raise these questions, however, Thucydides illustrates for the reader the incoherence of the Olympic perspective. Through the figure of Alcibiades we see how the Greek response to one's physical and psychological neediness—which originally gave birth to the concern for the common good and the discovery of justice—can lead to the subordination of the common good to individual self-interest, and thus to injustice. After all, Alcibiades, perhaps the fullest flowering of the Greek ideal, also represents the work's greatest traitor. By arranging political events to highlight his own greatness, Alcibiades earned a most infamous reputation as a double-dealer. Alcibiades' promise and apparent betrayal allow us to see more clearly how a war whose greatness consists in the suffering, lawlessness and injustice it wrought, could arise among the Greeks, who were the very cradle of justice and politics itself. In so indicating the single root of justice and injustice, Thucydides prepares us to wonder if justice, as it emerges in ancient Greece, possesses an unblemished integrity. Or is it inextricably linked to the injustice it opposes?

## Arcadia

Faced with such questions, we are led to wonder if there exists a more adequate response to those needs that led to the Greek discovery of politics. Again, Thucydides' most extended treatment of Olympic victors and Olympic Games (V.49-50) proves crucial to this quest. Thucydides identifies these games not by the impiety of Lichas, but by the victory of Androsthene of Arcadia. Because this is the only reference to Androsthene in his massive work, Thucydides' note here focuses our attention on his Arcadian background. Given the brevity of our task, we can only speculate about the importance of such a tiny region to Thucydides' broader purposes. Two observations here will suffice: Arcadia is mentioned along with Athens as the only regions in Greece whose soil lacked natural virtue (I.2) and it is ultimately responsible for giving Sicily its name (V.2).

As one commentator notes<sup>6</sup>, Thucydides' introduction to Athens suggests that her natural poverty proved critical to the emergence of her political talent and, ultimately, her imperial power. Thucydides' artistry thus presents Arcadia as an alternative to Athens, one whose response to her own neediness and vulnerability did not lead to conquest and empire, but rather to the emergence of an island power that would deal Athens its greatest defeat. Of course, given her location in the heart of the Peloponnese, Arcadia could never develop that stable population which proved so important to the growth of Athenian power. But even the great island-power Sicily, like Arcadia herself, never sought dominion over others. Rather, she defended herself against the unprovoked aggression of an imperialist Athens. Moreover, unlike every other Olympic victor noted in the *History*<sup>7</sup>, Androsthene, the Arcadian champion of the Pancration, never sought to translate his Olympic victory into political domination; apparently he did not understand his victory to entitle him to additional goods. Might it not be the case then that Thucydides intends to present Arcadia and Arcadians as reflecting an alternative response to those needs that led Athens, Cylon, and Alcibiades to seek the full disclosure of their greatness through political domination? Might Arcadia's example suggest that a more moderate understanding of natural greatness, borne from a profound initiation into human need and thus human limits, can be consistent with policies of restraint and concealment?

Such suggestions, though tempting, must also account for the fact that Arcadia herself was always subject to invasion by others and that her political heirs, the Sicilians responsible for naming their island, were eventually supplanted by the Syracusans. And the best examples of political moderation and prosperity in the work, Sicily, Chios and Sparta, owe such benefits to their outward domination of others. In fact, the *History* as a whole clearly shows that cities cannot practice such restraint and concealment if they hope to thrive and

remain free. But perhaps individuals can practice a restraint and concealment that is nevertheless consistent with their natural greatness. While men like Cylon, Alcibiades and Lichas do not practice such restraint or concealment, another notable political "failure" does. Could Thucydides embody the solution to the problems confronting Olympic victors?

### Thucydides' Love of Victory

While no Olympic champion, Thucydides informs us that he too seeks victory in his contest with the poets (I.9-11; 19-22). The character of the victory he seeks best comes to light by reflecting on his famous methodological comments near the beginning of Book I (22). Thucydides' particular method is crucial insofar as it is his distinctive approach to political affairs that constitutes his superiority over the poets. These comments insist on two strict distinctions: 1.) between the speeches and deeds of the History's actors and 2.) between Thucydides' judgment and historical accuracy. A concern with historical accuracy governed his treatment of the deeds, while he composed the speeches with a view to what was, in his judgment, necessary under the given circumstances.

This is a notoriously difficult passage, so we shall limit ourselves to a few simple observations.<sup>8</sup> First, as reflection on the History shows, the speeches and deeds of the History's actors are not as distinct as Thucydides insists. After all, aren't delivered speeches themselves deeds? And the line between his concern with historical accuracy and his own view of what was necessary also tends to blur. Again, didn't Thucydides select and arrange which episodes and speeches he judged necessary to report?

Were it not for his artistry, we might be inclined to attribute such apparent inconsistencies to Thucydides' carelessness. But if Thucydides is in control of his work, as he surely is, we must ask why he invites his reader to cast doubt on the adequacy of his methods through the very manner in which he presents them. If he wants to point out the insufficiency of strict distinctions between speech and deed or between historical accuracy and his own judgment, then why not just say so?

One of the virtues of proceeding so indirectly is that by insisting on the explicit distinctions between speech and deed and between his treatment of speeches and deeds, even as he acts to the contrary, Thucydides can bring to light the character of such distinctions in a manner that is faithful to their absence. And if Thucydides' speech does in fact eschew the strict distinction drawn between the speeches and deeds of the History's actors, then he can hardly be expected to draw the distinction between his speech and the speeches and deeds of the war so distinctly. To do so would be to commit the very fallacy

he seeks to correct. He can thus quietly indicate the character of his own "speech" even as he "speaks" openly of the speeches and deeds of the History's actors. But such observations should unsettle us since they leave us with the impression that Thucydides practices an almost unheard of indirection in his presentation of political life. In this way, he reminds us of Diodotus who, in his speech on the fate of the Mytileneans, informs his fellow Athenians of the need to lie to them (III.43).

The necessity and political relevance of such concealment emerge when we recall Thucydides' treatment of the Greek love of victory. In detailing the roots in human nature of the desire for self-disclosure, Thucydides sketched the single origin of both justice and injustice. By subtly indicating that the justice which defines Greek political life also issues in or requires injustice, he pointed us to the obstacles confronting our ability to realize (and thus to know) a universal, unified, and unblemished moral category like a "justice as such." Thucydides' treatment of speeches and deeds reflects this insight insofar as that treatment's blurring of the distinction between speeches and deeds suggests that universal categories-which can only exist in the realm of pure speech-cannot exist apart from the particulars that constitute them. By pointing to the necessity of particulars for understanding universal categories, Thucydides' speech, informed by his insight into Greek politics, discloses a limit to our ability to know universals simply.<sup>9</sup>

It would seem then that in his recognition and observance of such limits lies Thucydides' victory over the poets. As his presentation of his great rival suggests, Homer seeks the applause of his audience (III.104). In fact, Homer, just like any other athlete, participated in the musical contests of the Delian games, seeking the public praise of his poetry. In seeking victory at Delos, Homer seeks the recognition of his greatness and thus the external confirmation of his superior nature. He thus appears to share the political perspective of the Olympic victors. Moreover, his desire for such praise implies that he has not seen the problems with the view that Thucydides brings to light for us. And because his poetry serves such goals (see again III.104), one should not be surprised to discover that it suffers from the same problems facing those athletes and statesmen who see in their victories more than there is. Thus, one of Thucydides' first criticisms of Homeric poetry was that it exaggerated the war's greatness; like the Olympic champions, Homer saw in the Trojan War more than there really was.

In light of this, it would appear that the poets overlook the moral and political shortcomings that Thucydides grasps. Perhaps then they also fail to appreciate the limitations to reason that are their consequence. Thucydides triumphs over the poets because his work reveals the truth about human limits while still obeying such limits. And while the observance of such limits

discloses his greatness to us, as it did with the Spartan wrestlers and political elite, he does not require us to confirm that greatness for him. He wrote his work for neither applause nor prizes, but to be permanently useful (I.22). Of course, the lessons drawn out from Thucydides' presentation of Greek politics need not merely apply to his backwards glance at the poets. They might also serve as a preemptive criticism of those who follow Thucydides' efforts to present the enduring truth about human affairs. They suggest that Thucydides anticipated the difficulties that could beset the more direct dialectical inquiry employed by Socrates in the Platonic and Xenophontic dialogues. And these theoretical insights return us to the contemporary relevance of Thucydides.

### Thucydides and Europe

According to Pierre Manent<sup>10</sup>, the movement towards greater European unification is fueled by the belief that effectively erasing national borders within Europe will do away with the preconditions for warfare; no national boundaries means nothing to fight over. Europeans can cease worrying that they might someday revisit the horrors of the last century. This hope that that they can do away with war on the continent also stems from the view that war is little more than violent commerce. Given the sophisticated nature of modern free-market economies, we can peacefully address the commercial needs of men and nations and consider war a barbaric relic of a bygone age. A true union of European states represents the promise of a political good common to all Europeans by making national borders politically insignificant and enhancing Europe's economic standing in the world.

Thucydides' History, however, shows modern Europeans to be wrong on both counts. At the heart of the Greek love of victory, and thus conquest and war, is not the desire for commercial gain, but rather the full revelation of one's natural greatness. More importantly, he shows that the desire to reveal one's greatness finds its fullest and most consistent realization not in tyranny but in service to the common good. And this means one needs a vision of the common good that can arouse one's manly desire to assert his greatness on its behalf. But in the effort to abandon the politics of grandeur, modern Europeans obstruct any effort to articulate or even think about goods that are common to all; afraid of endorsing the exclusive goods they want to transcend, they shrink from putting goods "in common." They thus enervate those hidden springs within man that generate grand political action. And without any robust notion of the common good, one cannot hope individuals will simply restrain on their own the selfish pursuit of their ambitions. Nor can one reliably expect others to resist the efforts of their most talented and ambitious citizens. The tyranny they fear thus becomes more, not less, likely.

Of course, Thucydides' account of Greek politics also points to the tenuous nature of the justice that defines it. By pointing to the close link between justice and injustice, he points to the futility of all utopian schemes dedicated to realizing a good that is unambiguously common to all. His dramatic illustration of Olympic political psychology should thus temper the European propensity, cultivated by its century long experience with ideology, to seek political solutions embracing all of humanity. But more than this, the History offers a powerful, if quiet, warning for European political scientists. It suggests that the very effort to instantiate a community such as the E.U. clouds their capacity for genuine political reflection and self-examination. As Thucydides' methods suggested, one could only reliably gain access to "universal" political wisdom through reflection on the particulars that constitute political categories. But by trying to transcend particular national distinctions, contemporary Europeans undermine the very conditions required for the study of politics. Their utopian vision blinds them to the limits of reason, leaving them politically shortsighted and incapable of bearing witness to Thucydides' greatness. In presenting the life and death of Greek politics as he does, Thucydides reminds those concerned with Europe's apolitical drift of the humane necessity of politics while highlighting the fragility of Europe's most precious inheritance.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thucydides' work has no official title. I follow the convention of referring to it as the History. References to the History are in the standard book, chapter and section form. All translations of Thucydides' Greek are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Manent's *A World beyond Politics? A Defense of the Nation State* (Princeton University Press: 2006), chapter 7.

<sup>3</sup> For parallel readings of this section see Steve Forde's *The Ambition to Rule: Alcibiades and the Politics of Imperialism in Thucydides* (Cornell University Press: 1989), 48 and 175; Clifford Orwin's *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: 1994), 31; and Paul Ludwig's *Eros and Polis* (Cambridge University Press: 2002), especially 153-169 and 262-318.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides. Volume 1. Books I-III* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 26-7.

<sup>5</sup> Chapter 2 of Forde's *Ambition* proved a major source of inspiration for this section.

<sup>6</sup> See chapter 3 of Forde's *Ambition*.

<sup>7</sup> The only other time Thucydides identifies an Olympiad by one of its champions is at III.9, where he introduces the Mytileneans's speech to the Spartans by referring to Dorieus of Rhodes. To see the import of such a reference, compare Thucydides' later reference to Dorieus (VIII.34) with the Mytilenean speech here.

<sup>8</sup> There is perhaps no finer introduction to the subtleties of this passage than Clifford Orwin's "Thucydides' Contest," *Review of Politics* 51 (1989): 345-364.

<sup>9</sup> Such a limit does not undermine the possibility of knowing the enduring truth about human affairs. Thucydides himself makes his work's insights contingent on the constancy of human nature (I.22).

<sup>10</sup> See again chapter 7 of Manent's *A World beyond Politics?*.